

WHY MUSIC VIDEOS DON'T COST \$500

BY JASON SIROTIN / APRIL 17, 2013 /

Every week I get at least three phone calls from artists looking to create music videos. While these are occasionally legitimate leads, most of the time the people calling have minuscule budgets of \$500 or less. The purpose of this article is to clearly explain why a great music video does not cost \$500. My hope is that this post will serve as an education for people who are looking to make music videos but have very little knowledge of the business.

So the phone rings....

Having been in the music video production business for many years, I have a standard set of questions I always ask:

Can I hear the track?

Do you have a concept in mind or are you looking to us for guidance?

What's your budget?

These questions allow me to fully understand what and who we are dealing with.

We like to listen to the song first to evaluate if it has commercial viability or strong viral potential (or both). Often if we like the song, we are more likely to make a sweat-equity investment in the form of gear, reduced crew rates or extra edit hours. If we don't really connect with the song or make the judgment that the final product won't really have legs from a viewership standpoint, we will typically pass.

We ask the artist if they have a concept in mind for two reasons. If the artist has a vision for the video, we want to evaluate how much it will cost to realize that vision successfully. If the artist does not have a concept, we will determine what concepts we can effectively execute with the funds available, which leads us to the final question: the budget.

The music video production budget dictates nearly every facet of the music video production and post production process. Without one, we can't clearly lay out a plan to produce a successful video because we don't know what tools we'll have at our disposal.

Believe it or not, at this point, I am often asked, "what's a budget"? For our purposes, a budget is simply the total sum of money allocated for a particular purpose or period of time. So, in this case, it's "How much money do you have available to pay for the music video?".

As touched on above, the budget determines almost everything about the music video, including:

1. What the concept will or can be

Some concepts, like "performance piece" music videos (i.e. capturing a band playing live at a club) can be made very simply. However, more complicated music videos with high-end visual effects, motion graphics, complicated camera moves, and intricate costumes or props take time and resources. Basically, they cost much more money. In even the simplest, bare bones scenario, the costs are MUCH greater than

\$500. Knowing what funds are available helps us create or refine the concept so that it can be executed properly. Trying to produce a concept that is unrealistic for the budget simply sets you up for failure. When you engage our services, you're paying not just for the production, but for the execution. You can be sure you'll get the absolute best video possible for your available budget. That's what we do. If you have your heart set on a \$100,000 concept and you only have \$5,000, we're not going to move forward. We want to hit home runs with every project we produce, not just collect checks.

2. What locations will be available

Locations can often be an important component of a music video. Good locations typically require one of two things: money or a relationship. Even if you can get a “free” location, there is still cost involved. In this business you've got to call in favors carefully, because they are like gold. Most people only allow a film crew to take over their property one time, because, let's be honest, even a highly skilled film crew can be rough on a house/venue. Often the shoot and resulting video are not directly beneficial to the property owner. That means every time you get a location for free you are potentially losing it as useable location for future projects. It's also important to understand that planning, booking, and cleaning up the location cost time, and time is MONEY (READ: man-hours cost money). A good location will typically run you at least \$1000 for 10-12 hours, and frequently much more. \$500 won't take you very far in the locations department.

3. What kind of gear we will use

They say there's a million ways to skin a cat (who are these people who are skinning cats?). The same can be said for how a music video can be shot and edited. There are a plethora of high-quality professional camera options, countless lights with widely varied wattages and color temperatures, and a myriad of support equipment choices, all of which creates a multitude of options for directors and DPs. All these choices have different pros and cons and, most importantly, different pricing. Typically, the better the gear, the higher the price. The budget is important in this equation because \$500 won't even get you the body* for most professional cameras for a single day. It's important to note here that most gear rents in 24-hour increments. Often you can get three-day weeks and eight-day months to incentivize longer rental agreements. This means that, for example, if you rent the gear for seven days (a full week), you pay three times the daily rate (rather than seven) and if you rent it for thirty days (a full month), you pay eight times the daily rate. Once again, \$500 won't take you very far, even with the price breaks for longer rentals.

Music Video Camera Atlanta, GeorgiaSave
RED Epic camera body.

*Body: A camera body (sometimes called the “brain”) is the primary portion of the digital camera, which contains the controls, the LCD, the internal image processor, and the associated circuitry. (Essentially the camera without the lens.)

4. What size & skill level of crew you will have.

Making video is a team sport and a great team usually consists of at least seven to ten people. On larger projects the crew can be thirty people or more. Film and video crews typically work based on day rates. A day rate is typically a set amount of

money for a set amount of time filling a crew position. Typically our company runs crews on half day rates (4hrs) and full day rates (10hrs). Crew rates vary based on experience and ability. Yet another reason music videos do not cost \$500 is that good crew members aren't cheap. Highly skilled crew members ensure a high quality music video. And remember, you don't just have to pay them, you have to FEED them too (see below).

Below are some typical day rate ranges for video professionals in the Atlanta, Georgia area. The crew ECG Productions employs typically fall within these ranges (though rarely at the bottom of the range).

Atlanta Music Video Director Jason SirotinSave

Atlanta-based ECG Productions music video director Jason Sirotin on set.

Day rates based on 10 hour days:

Director: \$800 – \$3500

Producer: \$600 – \$800

Director of Photography: \$600 – \$2000

Camera Operator: \$400 – \$600

First Assistant Camera: \$250 – \$500

Assistant Director: \$400 – \$600

Second Assistant Director: \$250 – \$500

Gaffer: \$300 – \$600

DIT: \$300 – \$600

Rigging Grip: \$200 – \$400

Dolly Grip: \$200 – \$400

Electric: \$200 – \$400

Steadicam Operator (With Gear): \$800 – \$1600

Crane Operator (With Gear): \$800 – \$1600

Production Assistant: \$75 – \$200

Hair and Makeup: \$400 – \$800

Wardrobe: \$400 – \$800

Production Designer: \$500 – \$1500

Art Director: \$400 – \$800

Set Dresser: \$200 – \$400

Sound Engineer: \$300 – \$600

Boom Operator: \$150 – \$300

As you can see, \$500 isn't even enough to get you one crew member in most cases, let alone a full crew plus post-production and delivery.

Let me stress it again: music videos DO NOT cost \$500.

5. How long will you have to shoot the video?

Most music videos will take at least ten hours (one full day) to shoot, but some will take significantly longer, especially if there are a lot of company moves*. Because your gear and crew rates are all based around time, the longer you shoot the more it will cost.

*Company Move: The act of a film or video production team packing up all their gear from one location and moving to another location to continue shooting.

Atlanta Post Production Video Editing PremiereSave

ECG Productions recently made the switch from Final Cut Pro to Premiere Pro CS6.

6. How long will you have to edit the video?

The amount of time it takes to edit a music video can vary based on the complexity of the concept, the number of cameras used, the total amount of footage captured, the need for animation or special effects, and color grading to name just a few. Editing, color grading, animations, and compositing are all typically billed at an hourly rate. At ECG Productions we bill at \$125/hr for editing and \$150/hr for animation and compositing. We tend to fall within the median price range in the Atlanta area. So, as you can tell, \$500 does not go far in the post-production phase of the project either.

7. Food, beverage, and snack costs: (AKA Craft Services)

Almost no one outside the production business thinks about this, but on set you need to buy food & drink not only for the crew but for the cast and in some cases the client/investor as well. A crew of ten on a hot day can burn through beverages and ice quickly. Combine that with one (sometimes two) meals in a day, plus snacks, and costs can add up quickly. Even having your mom make food will still have some cost associated with it. I won't even mention "that" number again. I'm sure you get it by now.

All that said, we absolutely LOVE making music videos. However, after doing a number of them, its frustrating to be constantly asked for such a huge, all-encompassing undertaking for such a tiny amount of money. We aren't greedy, we just won't take on a project that we can't make successful. The reality is that the proper amount of money and resources is the key to making any video endeavor successful. The music business has changed drastically over the years and a good music video can be the cornerstone of creating your band's online image. Recently Billboard even started calculating their charts based on internet views, downloads, and listens. A great music video is an opportunity. It's a business expense and must be funded properly. Having a compelling video can mean the difference between making a living making music or waiting tables. I know it's cliché but you only have one chance to make a first impression.

And this is why MUSIC VIDEOS DO NOT COST \$500!

In closing (and I mean this in the absolute nicest way possible), if you have \$500 to produce your music video, you should probably be looking for a college student on Craigslist, not calling on professionals. We are happy to talk to you and offer our advice, but please don't be offended if we can't make your vision a reality at such a low price. I promise that we will always be honest with you, listen to your ideas and try to point you in the right direction. But I'd be lying if I didn't say that if you were thinking of picking up the phone to call me about your \$500 music video, that after reading this post, you'll go back and try to raise the proper capital to do it the right way before you reach out. We'll be here when you're ready, and I can guarantee you'll see every dollar you spend with us up on the screen. We're not lining our pockets here, we truly do love to create high-quality music videos at a fair price. That fair price may seem expensive, but that's only for one reason: we're worth it.

<https://www.ecgprod.com/why-music-videos-dont-cost-500-00/>